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THE THEORY OF RECAPITULATION AND THE RELIGIOUS AND MORAL DISCIPLINE OF CHILDREN

By WESLEY RAYMOND WELLS, Washington University

There is no such thing as a modern infant. The modern individual begins his career at precisely the same point at which each cave-man started. Only in the world of mythology does an individual spring forth, like Minerva, full-fledged in wisdom. In the actual world a long period of infancy, childhood, and youth must precede intellectual and moral, as well as physical, maturity. Present-day studies in genetic psychology have begun to reveal the real needs of the child, needs that are not at all the needs of the adult. Just as the infant's physical food is not that of the adult, so the intellectual, moral, and religious pabulum of the child is not properly that of the mature individual. Psychology gives us a scientific basis for requiring the child to speak, understand, and think as a child, while expecting the man to put away childish things.

Especially in the field of religious education is it imperative to take into account the needs of childhood and youth, and it is precisely these early religious needs that have been persistently ignored. As President Hall says,¹ "From the old New England Catechism to President Eliot's latest pronouncements reducing religion to ethical culture, American educators have to an extraordinary degree ignored the nature and the highest needs of the child, and persistently assumed that whatever was good for them was, of course, good for him."

There is little agreement as to just what the child's religious needs really are. The only certain way of learning the best methods of education is that of observation and experimentation. In religious education, however, there has been very little unprejudiced observation, as yet, and still less experimentation; but, in the meantime, while we are learning religious educational psychology, society has the immediate task of educating its youth. Consequently partially verified hypotheses must be adopted tentatively and tried out. Among these partially verified hypotheses is that known as the theory

¹ G. Stanley Hall, *Educational Problems*, Vol. I, p. 146.

of recapitulation, or the biogenetic law. This theory possesses its greatest value when applied to the problem of religious and moral education. According to this theory the beliefs characteristic of the primitive religions would possess value for the child, while only later in his development would the teachings of the higher religions become suitable.

My purpose in discussing the value of religious beliefs in individual development, beliefs of different kinds for different stages of development, is to combat two tendencies in present-day practice. One modern tendency is to give the child and youth absolutely no religious instruction. Many parents who have no religious beliefs themselves oppose the teaching of religion to their children on the ground of its untruth. If, as Professor Leuba has shown,² the majority of scientists do not believe in even the most essential of religious objects, God and immortality, it is probable that many of them would oppose the teaching of religion to children for the reason that, as they think, religious beliefs are false. Against such a view I would urge the teaching of religion for reasons of its value, regardless of its truth. Another class, the class of religious believers, would, in many instances, teach children the very same religious views that they think fit and proper for adults; and I would urge against this tendency the fact that the religious needs of the child are not the same as the religious needs of the adult.

I

The similarity between early human embryonic stages and lower forms of life was observed by embryologists early in the nineteenth century, and the theory of recapitulation was first clearly stated in its full evolutionary context by Fritz Müller in 1863, and then by Haeckel, under the name of "the fundamental law of biogenesis". Haeckel's statement of the law is as follows:³ "The rapid and brief ontogeny [the life history of the individual] is a condensed synopsis of the long and slow history of the stem (phylogeny): this synopsis is the more faithful and complete in proportion as palinogenesis [the reappearance or repetition of old, ancestral traits] has been preserved by heredity, and cenogenesis [deviation from the phylogeny of the group] has not been introduced by adaptation." This statement includes both the general law and its limitations. Each individual in its development repeats

² J. H. Leuba, *The Belief in God and Immortality*.

³ Ernst Haeckel (Joseph McCabe, translator), *The Evolution of Man*, Vol. II, p. 357.

its ancestral history, but not precisely. Many ancestral traits are lost, new traits appear, and there are numerous short-cuts.

Though it is not maintained by any biologists that the individual in all the details of its development climbs up the ancestral tree, still the theory in its broad outlines is accepted by practically all biologists. That this is true is shown by the fact that the theory is incorporated in the standard textbooks of biology and zoology. Human development, viewed in the light of this theory, is seen to be through stages represented ancestrally by the protozoa, by a radially symmetrical stage, by bilaterally symmetrical forms of life, by fish, by amphibia, and by simian forms, before the individual becomes relatively human at about the end of the second year. Such facts, unquestioned by biologists, are so significant that anthropologists and psychologists have carried the law of biogenesis further, to cover mental development through childhood and youth. There is not so clear a case for mental recapitulation, yet it is denied by few, and it is explicitly accepted by many. Thorndike⁴ is one who denies the applicability of the biogenetic law to human development, but his arguments against it are very inconclusive. He does little more than point out limitations of the theory, and everybody admits that the theory has limitations. Thorndike himself, however, accepts the theory in some cases.⁵ Baldwin,⁶ Hall,⁷ and Freud⁸ are among the most conspicuous psychologists who accept and employ the doctrine. President Hall perhaps carries it to somewhat extreme limits in many cases, and yet his application of it to religious education is of inestimable value. Mr. Guillet⁹ has made a thorough survey of the theory in its general application to education. Professor Coe¹⁰ employs the theory in his discussion of religious and moral education.

If not carried out in too extreme detail, the theory of recapitulation is of at least some service in explaining child

⁴ See E. L. Thorndike, *Educational Psychology*, Vol. I, *The Original Nature of Man*, Ch. XVI.

⁵ *Op. cit.*, Vol. II, p. 99.

⁶ J. M. Baldwin, *Mental Development in the Child and the Race; Social and Ethical Interpretations; A Genetic Theory of Reality*.

⁷ G. Stanley Hall, *Adolescence*, 2 vols.; *Educational Problems*, 2 vols.; and other works.

⁸ See especially Sigmund Freud (A. A. Brill, translator), *Totem and Taboo*, New York, 1918.

⁹ Cephas Guillet, "Recapitulation and Education," *Pedagogical Seminary*, Vol. VII (1900), pp. 397-445.

¹⁰ G. A. Coe, *Education in Religion and Morals*. See especially pp. 211-25.

development. In the first two or three years of life, the foetal stage included, the individual recapitulates the pre-human stages of evolution. Phylogenetically, pre-human stages represent an evolutionary period many times greater than the period during which man has existed. Yet we observe that the individual spends a much longer time recapitulating human than pre-human stages. This, however, is in accordance with the general operation of the biogenetic law. The oldest forms of racial life are recapitulated most rapidly, and the more recent ancestral forms, more slowly. The length of time taken to recapitulate a period does not depend upon the phylogenetic duration of the period so much as upon its recency in the ancestral series. It is to be expected, consequently, that the recapitulation of the human racial stage, representing perhaps a duration of a million years, should take a much longer time than the recapitulation of all the pre-human phylogeny, though this represents a period of many million years.

President Hall divides the stages of individual development into four periods, which he calls those of infancy, childhood, youth, and adolescence. The stage of infancy, lasting until the end of the second year, which has been called the simian stage, does not concern us now, nor does the fourth stage, of adolescence, occurring from the age of about thirteen to twenty-five or thirty, except the first few years of its beginning, for recapitulation does not occur after the beginning of adolescence. It is the stage of childhood, from two to eight, and that of youth, perhaps better called that of later childhood, lasting from eight to twelve or thirteen, that are of greatest importance for our immediate study. The age of childhood, with its imaginative activities, represents the savage stage, marked by a close relation to nature and a tendency to personify physical objects and to confuse the animate and the inanimate. The period of youth represents racially, according to President Hall, the culmination of a long line of savage development—a long and relatively stationary period in racial history. This is the age pre-eminently of physical activity and practical adjustment. In adolescence the stage of later civilization in the race gains ascendancy in the individual, and here the emotions tend to predominate.

The plan of education on a recapitulatory basis is to furnish to the developing individual, as far as this is possible, the appropriate environment for his stage of development. In religious education this means encouraging the natural succession of religious beliefs, just as they have occurred in the history of the race.

Religions may be divided historically into nature and redemptive religions. The chief distinction between the nature and the redemptive religions may be expressed in terms of the difference between human desires for satisfactions of a temporal and earthly sort, and desires for transcendent satisfactions. The earliest, pre-animistic forms of religion, the later forms, dominated by a generally animistic philosophy, both belonging to the tribal stage, and the later national, and more or less legalistic religions, such as are best illustrated by early Judaism, would all be included under nature religions. Early Judaism is a nature religion for in early Judaism Jehovah existed for the affirmation of "this world." Such religions as Zoroastrianism, Mohammedanism, Brahmanism, Buddhism, Judaism in its later development, and Christianity, are called redemptive religions. There is a clear and recognizable distinction between those religions in which gods are invoked to satisfy man's desires for material prosperity, and other religions that offer satisfaction to man's desire for "the peace that passeth understanding."

It is possible further to distinguish two classes within the nature religions, that is, the primitive and the morality religions. The morality religions, best exemplified by early Judaism, are still nature religions, but they have advanced beyond the stage of the primitive religions, because of the development and moralizing of the gods, and especially through the rise of some form of monotheism. There is a moral element in the primitive religions, *e. g.*, in taboo, but such a moral sanction is more or less incidental, and is clearly on a lower plane than the morality of the Mosaic code. Thus we may arrive at a three-fold classification of historical religions, like Siebeck's,¹¹ including (1) primitive, (2) morality, and (3) redemptive religions. Such a classification is best for furnishing a background for the recapitulation theory.

Roughly corresponding to the three stages of religious evolution in the race, there may be distinguished three stages of individual development. Childhood and the early part of what President Hall calls youth correspond to the stage of the primitive religions. The period of youth, especially the later part, corresponds to the stage of the morality religions. The beginning of adolescence marks the rise of the redemptive religions in the race. Such a correspondence, obviously, holds only in a general way. There are wide variations from it for individual differences are great. It is an ideal correlation,

¹¹ Cf. Hermann Siebeck, *Lehrbuch der Religionsphilosophie*, pp. 52-161.

which is never realized completely, but there is value in trying to approximate it.

Childhood and youth, according to the theory of recapitulation, are stages of external authority, for they correspond to times in racial history when the individual was wholly subject to taboo, to the "folk-ways," and to priestly control. During adolescence moral sanctions should lose their external character. Beliefs in taboos have their place in childhood, because of their moral influence; and in youth belief in a God of law, whose commands are right because commanded, likewise possesses positive moral value. A recapitulatory scheme of religious and moral education furnishes a basis for discipline in the early stages of development. Out of the imaginative nature worship of the child there should be allowed to grow a conception of a God who is the author of inviolable law. Belief in a stern God of law should only gradually give place to belief in a God of love at the time of the emotional awakening at the beginning of adolescence. However impracticable the theory may seem, since such discipline is implied by it, it has actually been practiced, deliberately or unconsciously, more extensively than is commonly supposed.

The early belief in taboos, and, growing out of this, the belief in God-given codes of law, are instrumental to the maintenance of desirable forms of conduct during early life, and to the formation of good habits that will persist after the disciplinary beliefs that once supported them have disappeared. As it was with the race, so it should be with the individual. Moral education should begin with taboo, and belief in a God of external authority is the strongest support of morality at the dawn of adolescence. As Partridge says,¹² summarizing President Hall's view: "The wide-spread view that morality can be taught without religion is wrong. . . . Children must have a sense of God as giver of laws, whose demand is right because He wills it; and certainly at adolescence, there must be religion to guide the moral life, if at no other time."

The maintenance of a legalistic stage in the religious development of children may seem at first thought like the imposition of undue rigor and sternness, approaching ascetic discipline. A certain degree of asceticism, however, is defensible, and necessary for the sake of future gain. The universe does not grant immediate satisfaction to all of man's desires, and the habit of accepting with calmness the evil with the good should be established early. An element of

¹² G. E. Partridge, *Genetic Philosophy of Education*, p. 185.

Stoicism is needed in every stable character, and the discipline of early religious beliefs is valuable as a means to the attainment of such a character. James inquires:¹³ "Does not . . . the worship of material luxury and wealth, which constitutes so large a portion of the 'spirit' of our age, make somewhat for effeminacy and unmanliness? Is not the exclusively sympathetic and facetious way in which most children are brought up today—so different from the education of a hundred years ago, especially in evangelical circles—in danger, in spite of its many advantages, of developing a certain trashiness of fibre? Are there not hereabouts some points of application for a renovated and revised ascetic discipline?"

II

The questions of discipline and of the value of taboo and of beliefs in legalistic religions are questions that merit consideration by themselves. Freudian psychology may be able to contribute something towards a solution of the problem.

There is among educational theorists and others at the present time a somewhat general tendency to rule out discipline, in favor of methods that will allow free self-expression, with trial and error as the first of the ways whereby the child is to learn what is right and wrong. Thus Professor Holt¹⁴ argues against taboos for children. He contends that unless the child is allowed to follow up his impulses to their conclusions, and to learn avoiding reactions in the case of undesirable and dangerous objects through experience with the objects themselves, the proper integration of reflexes will not occur to make later conduct reliable. This is all true within limits: but in many cases the bad consequences of an act are so long deferred that the child will never associate the consequences with the cause; or the consequences may in some cases be immediately disastrous, or perhaps fatal. In such cases the child learns nothing from the experiences, or else learns at too great a cost.

Professor Holt's argument against taboo is inadequate for it is based upon an inadequate conception of taboo. His example of taboo is not an instance of taboo at all. He argues that, in the case of the child who is forbidden by the mother to touch the flame, the child's behavior becomes a function,¹⁵ not of the flame alone, but of the situation—the flame plus

¹³ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 365.

¹⁴ E. B. Holt, *The Freudian Wish*, Chs. III, IV.

¹⁵ See Professor Holt's definition of behavior, *op. cit.*, Supplement, "Response and Cognition," pp. 153-208.

the mother. From this it follows, Professor Holt says, that in the absence of the mother, who is the source of the taboo, the child will burn himself in the flame. But this is not a case of taboo at all. Taboo involves belief in some super-human, invisible intervention in the event of doing a forbidden act. So, in the case of genuine taboo, there is no harm caused by behavior becoming a function of the object plus the taboo-character of the object. The source of the taboo is always present, and safe conduct is thereby assured. In later life the belief in many, perhaps all, earlier taboos will disappear, but proper conduct will continue in most instances for two reasons: first, because the correct habits that have been formed under the influence of taboo will tend to persist and to act just as mechanically as original instincts; and second, because, for the more mature individual, new and adequate rational sanctions for the continuance of the acquired type of conduct arise and take the place of the original taboos. No harm results even if all taboos do not disappear, for, as James says,¹⁶ "The highest form of character, . . . absolutely considered, must be full of scruples and inhibitions."

The two most fundamental instincts, from which the other instincts have developed, are the food-getting and the sex instincts. The regulation of the sex instinct is one of the constant problems confronting society. I would contend that, just as all education in sex morality¹⁷ in the race began in taboo, so sex taboo of some sort is necessary for the maintenance of desirable standards of conduct during the formative stages of individual development. Münsterberg¹⁸ argued for a certain amount of taboo in sex education. McDougall¹⁹ advises against too great a rationalization of the sex problem in early education. And Freud recognizes the necessity of inhibitions for physical and moral reasons, as a part of the sublimation process.

Freud insists upon the necessity of early sublimation of sex energy into socially useful channels; and sublimation, though positive, requires as its correlate a negative factor to check the primary expressions of sex in children. A recapitulatory theory of religious education provides both the negative factor, some sort of taboo or religious interdiction, and also the positive conditions that favor sublimation through supplying the growing individual with an environment suited to call out

¹⁶ *Talks to Teachers*, p. 179.

¹⁷ See Ernest Crawley, *The Mystic Rose*.

¹⁸ See *Psychology and Social Sanity*, pp. 17-19; 59-61.

¹⁹ *Social Psychology*, 8th edition, pp. 419-21.

such activities as are socially acceptable and also in accord with the developing interests of the individual. Harm would result if the primitive desires and activities of children were forbidden, and at the same time no new positive interests were encouraged; but, along with the encouragement of new, socially desirable activities, undesirable tendencies must be discouraged.

On Freudian principles religion is a valuable form of sublimation, especially at the beginning of adolescence, as well as earlier. Freud says,²⁰ "Owing to the oppositional relation existing between culture and the free development of sexuality, the results of which may be traced far into the formation of our life, the problem how the sexual life of the child evolves is . . . of very great importance in the higher stages of culture and civilization." Sublimation is the process by which sexual energy is utilized in other, non-sexual spheres, and in directions that are more approved of by society, and that are ultimately of more value for the individual as well as for society. Art and religion are the chief forms in which sublimated sex energy expresses itself.

According to Freud, the child is "polymorphous-perverse" in his sexual predispositions. That is, in his earliest years he has tendencies towards homo-sexuality, exhibitionism, sadism, masochism, etc. It is through sublimation of these perverse tendencies that normal sexuality and a moral character are developed. The "sexual latency period," from about the fourth year to the beginning of puberty, is the time when repression of perverse tendencies, and sublimation, are necessary. Inhibition of the early tendencies is necessary if neurotic disturbances are to be avoided in later life. Both normal and neurotic adults possess repressions in some degree. In neurotic individuals the repressions are not complete, and they consequently manifest themselves as symptoms of the neuroses, while in normal, healthy individuals repressed wishes are inert, or else they manifest themselves only in dreams. Repression alone, without sublimation, or substitution, will always have bad results; but Freud and most Freudians recognize the necessity of social and religious restraints, inhibitions, and taboos, as a part of the normal sublimation process. Thus Brill says:

"Were it not for the severe checking the individual constantly experiences from the very beginning of his childhood, which causes him to give up most of his desires, it would be impossible to live in any society, savage or enlightened. . . .

²⁰ Sigmund Freud, *Three Contributions to Sexual Theory* (A. A. Brill, translator), p. 85.

"This inhibiting process begins in childhood and is continued throughout life. . . . Throughout the whole course of our existence, society (religion and ethics) teaches us to curb our desires and to give up what we want. We want much and we get comparatively little, but *we never stop wanting*." ²¹

"Civilization, so-called, simply consists of inhibitions imposed upon the individual by religion and society. The more one can inhibit his primitive impulses, the more cultured he is, and savages and children must be taught inhibition to fit them for society." ²²

There is no virtue, of course, in curbing desires except for the sake of greater satisfactions; and it is for precisely this result that many of the desires of early childhood should be repressed and sublimated. Later health, not only moral, but also physical, requires sublimation, according to Freud. Whether the activities of the child shall develop into socially acceptable forms, depends upon the success that attends sublimation. Later neuroses result from unsuccessful sublimation and repression.

Freud's psychology has a very distinct recapitulatory background. This is shown especially in his book, *Totem and Taboo*, as is suggested by the sub-title, "Resemblances between the Psychic Lives of Savages and Neurotics." Since the adult neurotic individual represents a continuation of, or reversion to, psychic infantilism in the sexual life, the normal child is on a mental plane corresponding to that of the savage. What is normal for the savage and for the child, is a symptom of disease in the civilized adult.

Freud probable overemphasizes the rôle of the sex instinct in the economy of life, both in healthy and in diseased conditions. Such is the opinion of many critics. But critics such as McDougall, ²³ while rejecting Freud's extreme emphasis upon the centrality of sex, are glad to accept his notion of sublimation. Suppression of the primary forms of sex expression, and sublimation of sex energy into more desirable channels under the guidance of religious belief, have definite results of great value, as McDougall points out. ²⁴

Much of the early sublimation in later childhood would, in an ideal scheme of things, take place under the influence of religion of the legalistic sort. Then at adolescence sublimation would result, as it actually does in numerous cases,

²¹ A. A. Brill, *Psychanalysis*, p. 40.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 263.

²³ *Op. cit.*, Supplementary Ch., II, "The Sex Instinct."

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 424.

in a development into a new stage of religion, the stage of the redemptive religions. As McDougall says.²⁵ "The intensification of thought and feeling due to sublimation may affect principally the religious interests, and then becomes a main condition of the conversion which is so characteristic of adolescence." So it is seen how religious beliefs corresponding to beliefs of the legalistic stage in racial evolution have positive value at the beginning of adolescence in guiding the moral life and in causing continued sublimation and a normal growth into the redemptive stage of religion. In the words of President Hall: "Adolescence... is a period when, whatever may be the truth about it, it is a wholesome pedagogical method to apply a transcendental, supernatural cult."²⁶ "Religion, which has been the chief agent in regulating it [sex] in the past, must also be looked to in the future."²⁷

During early adolescence religious belief has a pronounced moralizing influence from the fact that the attribution of the new experiences, which are more or less inevitable at this time, to "higher" sources lends a seriousness and even sacredness to the experiences and to life as a whole. On the other hand, the individual who, with truer scientific insight, perhaps, attributes his new experiences of early adolescence wholly to physiological processes, largely of a sexual nature, possessing no religious significance at all, fails to get the inspiration of high moral ideals that are so valuable at this stage of development. It would probably be truer for the adolescent convert to ascribe his experience of conversion to a sexual source, but it is more valuable for him to believe that a religious significance attaches to the experience. One belief tends to elevate the character; the other tends to destroy the practical idealism of the adolescent period. The new emotions may be interpreted grandly or meanly, from "above" or from "below," idealistically or physiologically. For those experiencing the emotions there is value in the idealistic and religious way of interpreting the experiences.

III

I prefer my conclusion to be like that of some of Plato's dialogues—one in which nothing is concluded. I have sought chiefly to call attention to a sometimes neglected factor in education. The question of moral discipline divides American educational theorists into two camps. Professor Dewey

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 424.

²⁶ "College Philosophy," *The Forum*, Vol. XXIX (1900), p. 412.

²⁷ *Educational Problems*, Vol. I, p. 460.

represents one tendency, which is, in general, opposed to discipline. President Hall and his followers represent another tendency, which lays emphasis upon moral discipline. The truth probably lies somewhere between these divergent views.

It is claimed by Dewey and his followers that democracy and discipline are contradictory. Discipline is supposed to go only with an autocratic and militaristic form of society. The leading aim of American education, good citizenship in a democracy, if it is to be achieved through the operation of the principle of learning by doing, requires, it is claimed, that children, the citizens of tomorrow, shall learn the democratic principles of self-government by governing themselves today. President Hall accepts the theory of recapitulation as the basis of his view that a certain amount of discipline is necessary in the moral training of children. Such a view maintains equally with Dewey's that democratic citizenship is an important educational aim, perhaps the one most comprehensive aim in American education. It would point out, however, that democracy is the latest stage in racial evolution, a stage which is still in process of becoming established, and that individuals in the immaturity of their childhood and youth ought to relive the earlier life of the race, with its priestly control and its external constraints, before being fitted to take up the duties belonging to the highest stage of racial development.

Recognizing that the theory of recapitulation implies moral discipline, Dewey no longer accepts it,²⁸ though he did so earlier.²⁹ As a matter of fact, an acceptance of the theory, with its implied discipline, does not contradict democratic principles; it simply prescribes a postponement of their application in the nurture of children.

²⁸ *Democracy and Education*, 1916, pp. 84-89.

²⁹ *The School and Society*, 1899, p. 62.